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Diversity in the Workplace: Take Aim at the Right Target

By Adrian W. Savage, President of PNA, Inc.

Although diversity has been a hot topic for quite a while, clear progress is hard to find. There is a pattern of intense, well-intentioned activity that produces far less change than it should. When genuine, focused and well-meaning effort gives meager results, it is tempting to use this as evidence of the strength of forces resisting progress. That may be a part of what is going on, but I do not believe it is a complete view. The limited degree of progress should point us toward an essential question: are we taking aim at the correct target?

Diversity and discrimination are emotional issues. Our feelings of hurt and anger toward those who show prejudice easily cloud our vision. Even as organizations reaffirm their commitment to diversity, they may be missing the true causes of the situation. Diversity is not the problem. It is all around us, a natural part of this universe. We can neither avoid nor remove it, at least in some form, however hard we try. We do not need to increase diversity; we need to stop our fruitless attempts to pretend it does not exist. Asking why people persist in such obviously irrational behavior will point us to the true villains: fear, low self-esteem and a search for comfort in a threatening world.

Diversity itself is not a cause of prejudice or discrimination. The reason why people act in discriminatory and biased ways is more fundamental. It is our response to fear and low self-esteem. When we feel uncertain or bad about ourselves, we have a natural urge to seek validation of our sense of identity and importance. We try to bolster our self-esteem

by creating a sense of superiority to others. Those who practice discrimination are seeking **identity** by surrounding themselves with people, opinions and viewpoints like their own. They are searching for comfort and safety in the face of the obvious uncertainties of life. People with high levels of self-esteem rarely behave in ways that discriminate. They have no need to feel superior in this artificial way.

Why worry about diversity?

Diversity is everywhere. We do not need to produce or increase it. We have it naturally, whether we like it or not. No two human beings are the same. In an organization of a thousand people, there are a thousand cases of diversity - perhaps even more than that, since few of us are exactly the same in our thoughts, behavior or feelings for two days in a row. Look around. There are different genders. People have different colors of skin, hair and eyes. They have grown up in different cultures. They have different outlooks. All these are facts. We cannot say they are not so. The evidence for diversity in every aspect of our contacts with other people is unanswerable. If diversity is all around us and we have no need to seek to increase it, why should we be concerned at all?

Diversity is immensely valuable to organizations. It is the source of nearly all innovation and creativity. Where no diverse views or ideas are allowed to exist and be expressed, there will be little growth or invention. That is why dictatorships tend to struggle after a while and produce less than democracies. The dead hand of conformity

brings invention and growth down to sub-optimal levels. Diversity also serves to keep us honest. All those who wish to conceal their deeds from open view swiftly expel or silence dissident voices. It is the same whether we look at nations or businesses. Tolerance of diverse views means that people will probe and criticize. They will do what you would rather they did not do, especially if you wish to avoid being asked awkward questions.

Strong corporate cultures run this risk. The cohesiveness that comes from a near unity of viewpoint is often on the edge of slipping into a negative mode where other views are suppressed and their holders expelled. When no one is around any longer to call the organization to account or blow the whistle on questionable activities, it is fatally easy to drop into the viewpoint that the ends justify nearly any means. Recent events have made that abundantly clear to all of us.

The benefits of diversity are easily proven. Championing positive ways to make performance better and people happier is a more productive route than criticizing people, however justified the criticism. Those who champion diversity should consider stating their case in terms that will bring immediate interest from executives and business owners. Innovation, creativity, breadth of outlook and honesty are all desirable attributes for any business. The best way to persuade everyone to recognize and celebrate our natural diversity is to convince them of the benefits, personal and organizational.

The true sources of prejudice
Prejudice springs from our lack of self-esteem and courage in the face of the many setbacks life brings us. Most of us dislike uncertainty, yet it surrounds us every day. We feel unclear, fearful and vulnerable, so we try to make ourselves islands of predictability

and security in the midst of this terrifying reality. We try to limit anything that will increase our sense of being out of control and subject to forces we neither understand nor can influence.

Organizational systems act in ways that further suppress diversity, even though their authors may not have that intention. In the case of "good organization" and "administrative convenience," it is easy to demand conformity and look askance on the natural diversity that messes up our bookkeeping and records and causes us all kinds of extra work. Worse than this, many organizational structures produce a sense of separation and threat instead of bringing people together. Divisional structures create immediate separation, especially if they are geographically distinct as well. Identifying people by their functions quickly sets marketing against sales, finance against production and staff against line. It is a small step from despising the accounts department to despising any other readily identified grouping of people who happen to be different from us.

Many of today's organizations also produce fear on a massive scale. By emphasizing outstanding performance and constantly seeking out situations where failures or "competency gaps" exist, they create cultures full of threats to those whose performance is less than perfect. As leaders, we like to see ourselves as offering carrots, not using the stick, but the prevalence of notions such as firing the lowest performing 10 percent annually, gives the lie to this impression. Many payment and performance management systems put only a thin skin of encouragement over the hard facts of "get on or get out." And when the economic environment means layoffs are a daily news item, it is little surprise that people's hearts

are more likely to hold fear and concern than joy and satisfaction in their work.

Looked at in this light, diversity threatens the stability and predictability we are trying to cling to. Comparing ourselves favorably to another group that is easily identifiable serves to make us feel superior and less subject to fearfulness. Many politicians have used the tactic of finding some external enemy when they sense that internal tensions are working against them. Businesses are no different. Perhaps that is why we see so much emotional unease about globalization: it challenges us to accept that we cannot rationalize away any lack of competitiveness with the notion that somehow the other group is manipulating the costs or markets in their favor. We must accept that our own failings are costing us customers.

In matters of gender as well as race, loss of self-esteem by the dominant group quickly stirs up discrimination and prejudice. We ignore the reality that we are all far more alike one another than we are different, and there is greater diversity within any grouping (men, women, black, white, gay, straight) than there is between these groupings. If an American man could have more in common, say, with a Hispanic woman or an African person than with another American man, it makes any ideas of gender or racial stereotyping into nonsense. Our rooted tendency to respond to all uncertainty by seeking to impose our chosen identity on the world that surrounds us is the problem – that and our fear and shaky self-esteem.

The villain of the piece: the comfort of identity

When we feel threatened or unsure, we take comfort in what is most familiar. This includes being with others who think, act or look the way we are most accustomed to. Those who oppose diversity do so because

they want to produce situations where everyone is identical to them in some way they find important. Whether they seek only to meet white faces in the corridors of power, or only hear men's voices in the boardroom, their goal is to maintain an identity that they find comfortable and reassuring.

This act of clinging to identity to provide a sense of comfort is our true difficulty. We hug our imaginary identity to ourselves like a comfort blanket or a teddy bear. It is not just identity of appearance that brings us comfort, identity of outlook is even more important. Diverse viewpoints constantly challenge and threaten the certainties that we are trying to hang on to. Instead of being willing to open our minds to the possibility and value of different viewpoints, we seek out the company of others who think like us. In such an environment, our shaky sense of correctness is steadied and reinforced by others who agree with us. From there it is a very short step to fearing anyone whose words, ideas or even presence may seem to threaten our sense of being in the right.

If being right matters more than anything else, as is so often the case when we feel afraid and unsure of ourselves, it is tough to tolerate diverse, complex or opposing views. We seek to confirm our rightness and exclude anything that suggests otherwise. It is interesting that the more emphatically groups of people claim to possess ultimate truth - be they religious, political or organizational - the less tolerant they are of dissent. Looked at logically, if they truly possess some ultimate truth, they have nothing at all to fear from any other position. Yet people of a fundamentalist cast of mind regularly persecute, expel and sometimes seek to harm those who disagree with them. And in case you think this does not happen in a corporate environment, stop and reflect whether any of

the exhortations to commitment, team working and loyalty you have heard from those above you have ever carried more than a hint of the unpleasant consequences that might follow if they are ignored.

Focusing on what matters

Whatever we focus on tends to grow more and more evident to our minds. Take someone who gets annoyed by dog mess on the sidewalk. Once this is an issue, he or she is going to notice every sorry pile of doggy poo anywhere within visual distance. Many well-meaning attempts to deal with problem issues end up with a similar effect. Diversity programs draw everyone's attention to difference. The result is to make us more attentive to the differences between us - to make us ever more sensitive to the fact of differences in gender, or ethnic background, or any kind of disability. Now all we see is the difference. Our ability to focus on what we have in common and what would draw us together gets lost.

Maybe that is why many well-intentioned programs to "promote" diversity seem to fail in their objectives. In truth, they work too well. They do indeed promote diversity: they continually emphasize differences and the areas that separate us. Instead of programs to encourage diversity - which needs no encouragement, since it is present whether we want it or not - we should be building-up low self-esteem and lessening fear, which are the root causes of people's search for comfort through identity and the false sense of superiority it can bring.

Similarity: The answer to diversity issues

What answer can be given to anyone who genuinely wants to obtain more of the benefits of diversity without the process becoming unbalanced and focusing on separation instead of co-operation? My own

answer would be to focus as much attention as possible on **similarity**.

Unlike identity, similarity allows for natural differences, while holding them within a broader viewpoint that allows us all to see that we have as much in common as we have uniqueness. We can be similar in some ways and different in others. We can have different skin color, yet similar abilities, intelligence or ambition. Similarities draw us together, yet honor our differences at the same time. Instead of diversity initiatives, it would be interesting to launch similarity programs. If we all grew interested in our natural similarities, the differences would, I believe, become far less of a cause for dissent or prejudice. After all, if I feel similar to my friends from other ethnic backgrounds, it is hard to feel much prejudice at the same time.

Organizations should take practical steps to remove the causes of discrimination, not preach about moral superiority through diversity programs. Accentuating differences is counterproductive, as we have seen. It is far better to work to remove fear and threats to self-esteem from the systems that people work within. Those who feel comfortable and positive about themselves have no need to discriminate. **The best aid to lessening prejudice in the workplace would be to remove all attempts to motive people through threats and punishments and instead concentrate on helping employees build on their strengths. Constantly seeking out more weaknesses that need "remedial action" is the best way to produce the climate of fear that breeds discrimination.**

We all have so much potential to offer to one another. We are all different, whatever else is true of us. Nature never produces two **completely** identical copies of anything, from snowflakes and galaxies to people. By

focusing attention on our gifts and similarities, we will avoid arousing primitive anxieties in all but the most paranoid.

Diversity comes with the territory. Trying to find comfort through identity is a hopeless search that warps our minds. Only through treating everyone with respect and care can we balance our individuality and our common humanity in the cause of a more coherent and productive organizational world.

The more we try to pin things down and create a sense of security, the more insecure we will feel. The more we try to keep things under control, the more chaos we will see around us. The more we chase after predictability, the more uncertainty we will find. The more we fear change, the more changes there will be to fear.

The antidote to fear of uncertainty is letting go. Instead of trying to predict and control, we can enjoy the constant surprises that come along. Instead of facing the future with a grim determination to have things our way, we can relax and look ahead with interested curiosity. Instead of clinging to an illusory sense of identity to bolster our self-esteem, we can celebrate our natural similarity. We are the same **and** we are different, so we have the best of both worlds. Diversity is our birthright. We should resist all attempts to steal it from us.

About the Author

Adrian W. Savage is president of PNA, Incorporated, which provides solutions that enable corporations to manage succession management, employee retention and talent utilization. More than fifteen years ago Mr. Savage co-founded the forerunner of PNA with the goal of clarifying the way people and organizations utilize their potential. Drawing on a background in senior management positions in diverse organizations and experience with complex organizational structures, he developed fresh ways of understanding what allows companies to achieve optimum performance. Mr. Savage was quickly

convinced that the primary blocks to optimum performance are poor systems and unclear motivation, both derived from the habits we form around what has worked for us in the past. When people can align themselves successfully with their unused talents and fundamental values, they can seize the opportunities available to them to make the kind of contribution that fully reflects their ability, helping themselves and their organization achieve new levels of business success.

As a result of his lifelong interest and research in individual development, Mr. Savage founded PNA, Incorporated. PNA provides corporations with solutions for talent management, organizational development, succession planning and key staff retention. Using proprietary approaches that have been developed and proven over more than 15 years, the company helps national and international clients maximize individual, team and organizational strengths to achieve their business goals. PNA is part of the global RSM International network. Visit www.nettps.com for more information or call 908-541-1700.

About Work In Progress Coaching

Founded by Camille Smith, Work In Progress Coaching specializes in increasing the performance and productivity of executives, managers and teams. Her approach enables people to achieve organizational goals while maximizing personal and corporate resources. "When people access their potential and produce results that they thought were impossible, two powerful things happen: the bottom line benefits *and* people's view of what they can accomplish together is expanded. This gives the individual and the organization the ability to create and fulfill rewarding futures."

As an associate of PNA, Inc., Camille is a certified NetTPS™ Solutions Provider. For more information, call 831-685-1480 or visit www.wipcoaching.com.